

WILLIAM BEDFORD

Necromantism and Masochism

An interview with James Kirkup

During his year as Creative Writing Fellow at Sheffield University, James Kirkup and I had several conversations which form the basis of this interview. He is now back in Japan. An outrageous and vivacious talker, Kirkup emphasizes everything he says with vivid gestures and unpublishable anecdotes. He amused himself in Sheffield trying to sell the idea of beaming poems up onto clouds so that the local steel workers and miners might have a little joy in their lives. Born in South Shields, 1923, he attended Durham University. He has published numerous volumes of poetry, including *The Drowned Sailor* (1948), *A Correct Compassion* (1952), *The Descent into the Cave* (1956), *Refusal to Conform* (1964), *Paper Windows* (1967), *The Body Servant* (1972), *Zen Gardens* (1973) and *Scenes from Sesshu* (1978). He has also published two volumes of autobiography, *The Only Child* and *Sorrows, Passions and Alarms*. It was, of course, Kirkup's poem 'The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name' that was involved in the *Gay News* trial. His mystery play 'The True Mystery Of The Passion' was used as the text in an Easter Service by the Cathedral of Christ the King in Johannesburg.

You've published two volumes of autobiography, I know, and what might be directly biographical poetry. How do you react to the 'confessional' label?

JK Much of my poetry is direct autobiographical experience, but I am not a 'confessional' poet. When people tell me I write 'confessional' poetry, I ask, 'How do you know this poem is confessional?' Whether autobiographical, or partly autobiographical, or not at all autobiographical, my poems are always works of the imagination.

And yet throughout your work there is this recurring obsession with childhood.

JK I spent my childhood and youth in the North East of England, a place – Tyneside – I remember with both horror and affection. I was an only child, early exposed, at the age of six, to death. I had no friends and a sense of being utterly apart and strange. I was terrified of the Christian religion, yet had a passionate love of Jesus who I thought might have been my friend. I loved the sea, the sands and cliffs of Durham and Northumberland. My initial longing was to be a dancer or a musician. . . .

Not a writer?

JK Well, we were too poor for me to have lessons, so I started to write, which cost nothing; it became an answer to my loneliness.



When did you start writing?

JK About the age of seven. I liked writing essays in school, and doing translations of French, German and Latin poetry, and putting English poems into these languages. My first 'serious' poem was written around 14, very pantheistic and Shelleyan: 'Lamentations of an Old Man on Realising that his Days of Usefulness are Passed.' I knocked them cold with that at Westoe Secondary, and of course in that dread Philistine environment, I was more of an outcast than ever when the 'Anon' with which I signed the poem in the school magazine was discovered to be that creep Kirkup. But I was filled with intense joy, as I always am in suffering. I am a dedicated masochist. My only fear is that Fate will not lay it on hard enough.

You've spent some considerable time in Japan, haven't you?

JK Yes, I first went to Japan in 1959, and it was a revelation. I felt I had lived there in a previous existence, and for the first time in my life I did not feel a stranger on the earth. My students and colleagues delighted me. I now give only five classes a week. The rest of the time is my own as I do not have to attend faculty meetings and so on. I have dozens of friends, and lots of readers, in Japan; very few (perhaps two) friends in England. Naturally I prefer living where people like me.

What kind of influence has Japanese culture had on your work?

JK The influence of Japanese art, poetry, and philosophy, particularly Zen, began when I was at Leeds and

started studying Daisetz Suzuki, Lao Tzu, Coomaraswami, and other mystics. At that time, I never dreamed I would go to Japan one day. My poetry, right from the start, had a foreign, Imagist and Symbolist-Decadent touch which is not understood in England but which Japanese, Chinese and most Europeans can appreciate. I don't 'think English', thank Buddha!

And Japanese art?

JK In all forms of Japanese art I admire the suggestive delicacy of selected forms, colours and images, the firmness which is not rigid in form, as in so much academic English poetry and art. A sense of flowing, being, loving, peace.

I know you're particularly interested in the relationship between poetry and other art forms. How do you see the relationship between, say, poetry and the visual arts?

JK I try when I interpret music, dance, theatre, all forms of painting and sculpture, in my poetry, to make the painting or whatever become my poem, my poem the painting. I love classic Japanese stone gardens, and collaborated with a Swedish print maker, Birgit Skiöld, on my *Zen Gardens*, one-line haiku poems with her photo-etchings. We have just recently finished another collaboration, *Scenes from Sesshu*, with Birgit's designs and prints, in the

form of a lovely Japanese-style hand-made folding book.

Poetry and music?

JK Whenever I write a poem I think of it as a piece of music, as a very subtle rhythm that only my own voice can manage properly, as a pattern of vowels, shapes, repetitions, images – all highly painterly, musicianly. I've just done a new sonnet on the vowels in homage to Rimbaud. All colours.

You're not very happy in Britain, are you, although I think you enjoyed your time with us in Sheffield. How does our culture look to a permanent exile?

JK I have never felt at home as a poet in Britain. Compared with Japan and Europe, Britain is stiff and dull and tedious to me. It does not inspire me in any way, and anyhow I always feel obscurely threatened and frightened in England.

What about contemporary British poetry though?

JK The academic provincialism, smugness and emotional barrenness of English verse today bores me to stupefaction. I think British poetry is in a dreadful decline, owing chiefly to the paralyzing influence of university poetry and poetry-explainers, if you'll forgive me. The abominable Leavis and his cohorts have poisoned the life springs of British poetry.

Life's a word Leavis uses an awful lot.

JK Nevertheless. I think Britain is going slowly mad. And then, in England, people are really anti-art, anti-poetry. I get the impression that even British poets, and the mediocre poetry reviewers with their slapdash generalizations, are anti-poetry.

And in Japan things are somehow different?

JK In Japan, poetry and poets are accepted as naturally as breathing by all levels of society, not just by pedantic culture snobs.

And you think this is largely due to the spread of university English, irony and so on?

JK I really don't see why it is necessary to *teach* English Literature at all. How do *you* teach it? Anyone with half a mind can teach himself. Literature teaching in schools is necessary, I think, and is now very good. But once a person becomes eighteen, he doesn't need to waste time on all that New Criticism and stuff – it's all a lot of wind. I think more poets should be allowed to teach, not lecturers. But alas, British universities simply don't know how to handle the poets – they treat them like office workers on a 9–5 job, and also expect them to be conventional academics. Failure of the imagination is the rot that

undermines English Literature Departments.

What about your early influences?

JK I read vast amounts of books when young – all of Dickens, Bennett, Galsworthy, Rossetti, Shelley, Virgil, Homer, Shakespeare etc. . . .

I can't believe you'd claim Bennett and Galsworthy as influences?

JK Well, you see, when I was able to read Baudelaire, the Parnassians, the Symbolists, and then modern French, German, Italian and Spanish poetry, I lost interest in British literature. But I love teaching it, especially poetry and drama. . . .

And in a university, too!

JK Yes, but teaching my Japanese students, it reveals itself anew.

Which is what should happen in any good teaching . . . however . . . You do a lot of translating, don't you? Can one translate poetry?

JK Yes, one can translate poetry. The words of the original are the least part. It is what lies between and behind the words that matters – I have a sixth sense, a kind of mediumistic intuition of what the poet *really* means, even when he is writing in a language of which I know very few words, like Chinese or Russian. I make his poem flow into mine, like a precious liquid, and

I never spill a drop. But most people don't realize this is the *art* of translation.

Can I ask you something about your poem 'The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name.' Would you like to talk about the poem for a change, rather than the Gay News trial?

JK Yes, I would really rather not talk about the trial. In any case I know almost nothing about it, as I never read the papers. I respect *Gay News* because I believe they do a responsible job, and help a lot of men and women who are distressed and confused by their sexual preferences. I've always liked to contribute my poems to unlikely magazines, so it was in keeping with my style to contribute poems to *Gay News*. They were aimed at a tiny fraction of readers who like poetry.

Why this particular choice of subject?

JK For me, nothing is barred in poetry, and all is sacred. During 1970 and 1971 I wrote a large number of humorous erotic poems – not obscene – it was a passing phase such as many writers and artists experience, and a valuable one. I maintain my right, as a poet, to write what I want and as I please. If that makes me in Britain a dissident then I am one.

The subject of the poem. . . .

JK I reject, as a pacifist anarchist –

all good poets are natural anarchists – authority of any kind, be it of the State or the Church. Not for nothing was one of my books entitled *Refusal to Conform*, out of print like all my other works – this is the way Britain silences her dissident poets as effectively as any totalitarian state. It was because of my absolute refusal to submit my individuality to conscription that I was a conscientious objector in the war – and still am, and always will be, against every kind of violence, both personal and national. I reject the repressive elements in religion and morality. I have a right to live exactly as I please, as long as it hurts no one but myself. As I am now entirely alone in the world, I have only myself to answer for.

Well, you used the word 'hurt'. Do you concede that the poem might 'hurt' – in the sense of offend – certain readers?

JK You're defending censorship!

Not at all, I'm just interested in your response to some of the criticisms that have been made.

JK When I'm travelling in Sicily or Italy, I see dreadful mosaic pictures of Christ and the Virgin – to me, these are obscene pictures, truly, because so slick and mechanical – they make me want to throw up. But when I look upon the magnificent Crucifixion paintings by Francis Bacon, I am uplifted. Indeed, my Christ poem was partly

inspired by Bacon's great Crucifixion Triptych which I saw in Munich; it thrilled me as no conventional art has ever done. I go back to see it every year, and I meditate before it.

So the whole business of blasphemy is a nonsense?

JK One should always be able to laugh at the Crucifixion and weep at the Resurrection. Blasphemy – what on earth can it be? Blasphemy, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. I am, like Baudelaire and Poe, a necromantic, 99 per cent in love with easeful death, and not a vulgar necrophilic. I love death because I believe it has its own kind of life and beauty – though I do not believe in man's immortal soul or an eternal life.

I'm not sure I understand that, quite?

JK As a child, I was struck by lightning deflected from the steeple of my own Primitive Methodist Chapel in South Shields. During a thunderstorm in the mountains last summer, I bared my breast to the elements and called upon the God of the Christians to strike me dead if I had 'blasphemed'. But he took no notice of me whatsoever. . . .

Probably he's waiting. . . .

JK Probably he doesn't exist. I have faith, but only in myself.

Okay. What about the reaction to the poem, you've had some interesting responses, haven't you?

JK I heard from Elizabeth Goudge, who used many of my poems in her anthology *A Book of Faith* that the theologians at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield do *not* find my poem 'blasphemous'. But they are contemplatives.

And the general reaction in this country, if I dare ask?

JK I think it miraculous, that in bigoted, Philistine Britain, increasingly indifferent to, or else contemptuous of, things of the spirit and the genius of art, a mere poem should have been able to arouse such depths of feeling. Of course, the phlegmatic and rigid British hate having their passions aroused, so I think this does not indicate any interest in poetry, but rather its death-rattle.

Photography

IAN JEFFREY

Spring is especially welcomed in Buffalo

Photography holds an odd position in the arts. People have aspirations for it, as they always have had. The breakthrough sometimes seems to be at hand. Yet the day of parity never arrives – often because of a deep-seated obtuseness in the art world, but also because of widespread, though rarely stated, suspi-